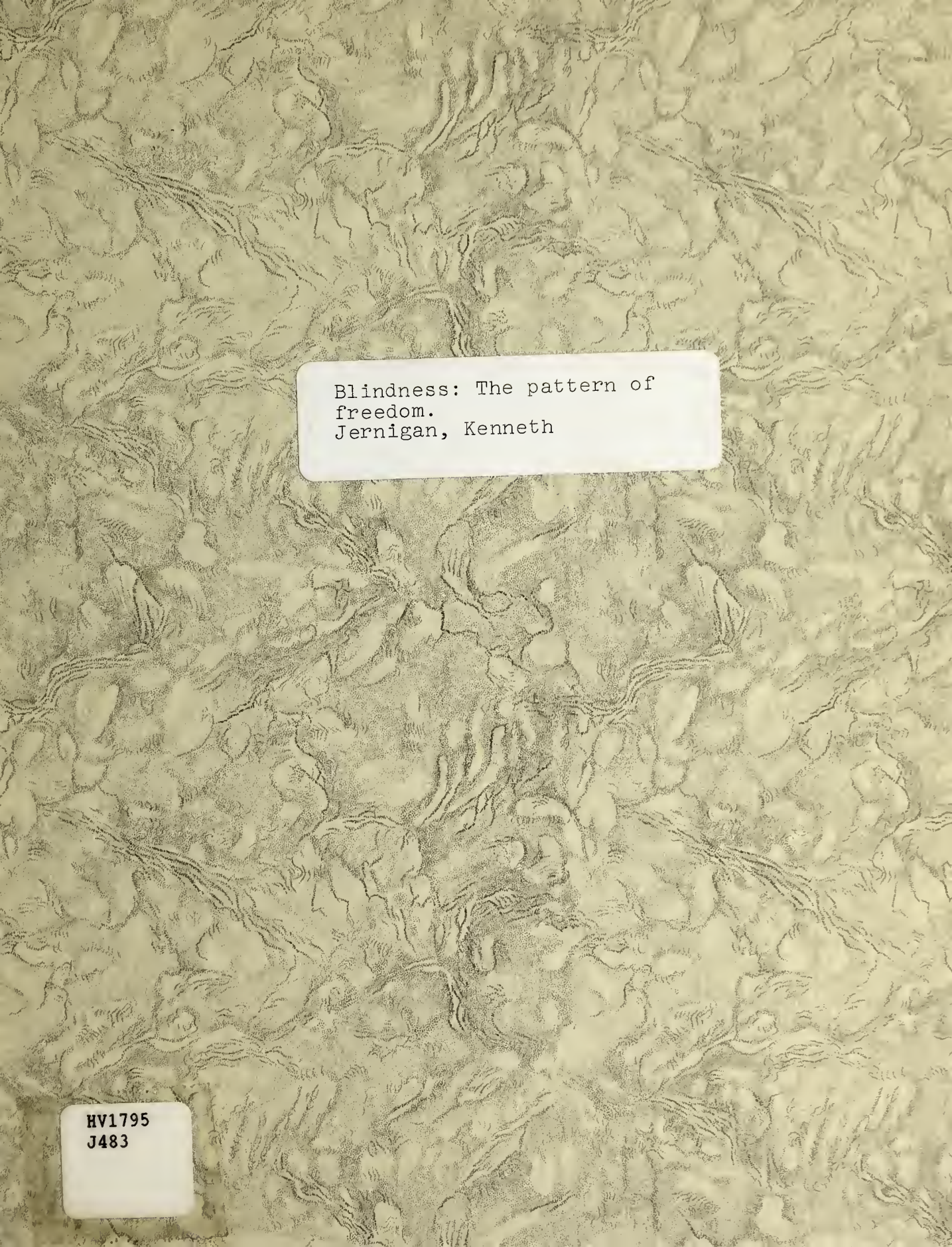




Blindness: The pattern of  
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Jernigan, Kenneth

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## **BLINDNESS: THE PATTERN OF FREEDOM**

An Addressed Delivered By

**KENNETH JERNIGAN**

President, National Federation of the Blind  
At the Banquet of the Annual Convention

Louisville, Kentucky, July 4, 1985



The National Federation of the Blind  
is not an organization speaking for the Blind.  
It is the blind speaking for themselves.

**National Federation of the Blind  
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Baltimore, Maryland 21230  
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When the playful dawn came down to the  
sea,  
I ruffled its hair with gladness.  
I saw the waves and flexed my soul in  
freedom.  
Humanity comes through the optic nerve,  
And justice lives in the eye.  
Not creed or law or politics  
But curvature and the nature of light.  
The blind man yearns in a land apart,  
Slave though richest king.  
Not for him the full broad sweep of mind  
and spirit—  
Dark the channel, nerve and tissue;  
Long eternal through the night.  
Day comes down to touch the ocean,  
And I stand up to look and live.  
Books of science unromantic—freedom's  
passport to the soul. [1.]

When I first read that poem, I thought  
how literate, how polished, how skill-  
fully written—how absolutely gross and  
totally false. Poetry is the art of  
saying so much in so few words that  
prose will not work as a means of  
expression. It does for language what  
the computer does for science and what  
the aerial photograph does for a land-

scape. On nothing more than a sheet of  
paper you can do any calculation which  
the most up-to-date computer can do, but  
if the problem is complex, you will do  
it more slowly—so much so that you will  
never live to finish it. You will not  
understand the patterns and relation-  
ships—or, for that matter, even know  
they exist. They will be buried in  
minutiae and lost in delay. Likewise,  
you can walk the earth and map a conti-  
nent, but you can never see its patterns  
and perspectives. There is too much  
detail, and it will take too long to put  
it together.

Poetry (properly used) cuts through  
verbage and speaks to the soul. Like  
the computer and the aerial photograph,  
it condenses time and reveals patterns.  
But we must not be bamboozled. There is  
no magic in sophisticated tools. They  
are only as good as our understanding.  
Ancient astronomy predicted quite  
accurately the course of the stars and  
the date of eclipses, but it was based  
on the mistaken notion that the earth is  
flat and the center of the universe. In  
the absence of understanding a computer  
would not have brought enlightenment.

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It would only have reinforced the misconceptions. Aerial photographs are equally subject to misinterpretation. They give us data but not the wisdom to comprehend it.

Poetry is the same. It does not live in a vacuum but is built on a frame of accepted values and assumed truths. Therefore, when the poet tells us that humanity comes through the optic nerve and justice lives in the eye—when he speaks of freedom as a product of sight—he is not proclaiming new discoveries but repeating old superstitions: our common heritage—man's ancient fear of the dark, the equation of sight with light and light with good. He is doing what the perceptive poet always does. He is resolving contradictions and distilling (whether true or false) the essence of cultural consensus. He is going to the core of our inner being and making us face what we truly believe.

But, of course, an increasing number of us do not believe it. In fact, it is not a question of belief. As we go about our business from hour to hour and minute to minute, we know from personal experience that it is false. Blindness does not mean dehumanization. In our homes and our offices, in factories and laboratories, on farms and in universities, in places of recreation and forums of civic accomplishment we live the refutation of it every day. While it is true that seventy percent of us do not have jobs and that all of us are routinely treated like children and wards, it is equally true that thirty percent of us do have jobs and that all of us are coming to realize that the problem is not blindness but mistaken attitudes. If even one of us can be a scientist

(and many of us are), that does not prove that if an individual is blind he or she can be a scientist, but it does prove that blindness will not prevent a person from being a scientist. In short, it proves that blindness is not the barrier.

Sight is enjoyable; it is useful; it is convenient. But that is all that it is—enjoyable, useful, and convenient. Except in imagination and mythology it is not more than that. It does not have mysterious psychological implications; and it is not the single key to happiness, the road to knowledge, or the window to the soul. Like the other senses, it is a channel of communication, a source of pleasure, and a tool—nothing less, nothing more. It is alternative, not exclusive. It is certainly not the essential component of human freedom. The urge to liberty and the need to be free are commodities of the spirit, not the senses. They divide civilization from savagery and human beings from animals.

Liberty has been the focal point of more study and comment than perhaps any other idea which has ever troubled, motivated, and inspired mankind. It is the stuff of dreams, not optic nerves and eyeballs. The effort is always to understand and, by so doing, make life better and more in tune with ultimate reality—a combination of bread and the prayer book, food for the body and food for the soul.

Liberty and freedom. Two words, one concept. Always noble, always imposing—ever the dream, ever the mover of nations. And while we cannot capture freedom in a rigid cage, we can describe it, seek it, and recognize its transcendent power.

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Harold Laski said: "We acquiesce in the loss of freedom every time we are silent in the face of injustice."

Daniel Webster said: "God grants liberty only to those who love it, and are always ready to guard and defend it."

Benjamin Franklin said: "They that give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Samuel Adams said: "If you love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude better than the animating contest of freedom, go home from us in peace."

John Dewey said: "Liberty is not just an idea, an abstract principle. It is power, effective power to do specific things. There is no such thing as liberty in general; liberty, so to speak, at large."

Cicero said: "Freedom is participation in power."

Herbert J. Muller said: "Freedom is the condition of being able to choose and to carry out purpose."

Herbert Spencer said: "No one can be perfectly free until all are free. No one can be perfectly moral until all are moral."

The nineteenth-century German writer Max Stirner said: "Freedom cannot be granted. It must be taken."

Walter Lippmann said: "Men cannot be made free by laws unless they are in fact free because no man can buy and no man can coerce them. That is why the Englishman's belief that his home is his castle and that the king cannot enter it, like the American's conviction that he must be able to look any man in the eye and tell him to go to hell, are the very essence of the free man's way of

life."

So the tapestry of freedom is constantly being woven, and we are part of the fabric; but there is something beyond. There always is. Each minority has its separate pattern, its road to freedom, its task to be done. And for the blind that task is monumental. It is nothing less than the total re-direction of society's effort and perception—for we are not patients, and (contrary to popular belief) our problem is not lack of eyesight or inability to perform.

What we need most is not, as the professionals would have it, medical help or psychological counseling but admission to the main channels of daily life and citizenship, not custody and care but understanding and acceptance. Above all, what we need is not more government programs or private charitable efforts. Instead, we want jobs, opportunity, and full participation in society. Give us that, and we will do the rest for ourselves. Give us jobs, equal treatment, and a solid economic base; and we will do without the counseling, the sheltered workshops, and the social programs. We will not need them. We have the same medical, vocational, social, and recreational needs as others; but our blindness does not create those needs, and it does not magnify or enlarge them. It does not make them special or different. We are neither more nor less than normal people who cannot see, and that is how we intend to be treated. We want no strife or confrontation, but we have learned the power of collective action, and we will do what we have to do to achieve first-class status. We are simply no longer willing to be second-class citizens.

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When the National Federation of the Blind came into being in 1940, the means were limited and the numbers few, but the goal was clear. Today (almost fifty years later—when we have tens of thousands of members and are the strongest presence in the affairs of the blind) the purpose is unchanged. It is exactly what it was in 1940. It can be told in a sentence. We want freedom—jobs, homes, the chance to succeed or fail on our own merit, access to places of public accommodation, interdependence with our neighbors, and full participation in society. The words are easy, but the fact has been long delayed. From the dawn of history blind men and women have worked and hoped and waited, but only in recent years (only with the coming of the National Federation of the Blind) has our dream approached reality. And now the waiting is over. Yes, we have waited—oh, God, how we have waited!—but never again! No more! In this generation our time has finally come—for we are determined at long last to live the truth of what we are, and not what others think we are or try to make us become or believe. As Cicero said: "Freedom is participation in power." And as Max Stirner said: "Freedom cannot be granted. It must be taken."

There are four essential elements in the pattern of our freedom. Each has a different part to play, and each is necessary. They blend to form a tapestry, which can never be finished without the composite.

The first and most important of these elements is internal. It is what we believe and become within ourselves. The second is public education. The third is the law. The fourth is confrontation. Other people tend to treat

and value us as we treat and value ourselves. In matters of the spirit, before a thing can become reality, we must believe it; and before we can believe it, we must say we believe it.

We say we are as good as the sighted, able to compete with them on terms of equality. We say that we deserve all of the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship and that we are capable of exercising them. We say that it is respectable to be blind. When the time comes that a majority of us know for a certainty within ourselves that these things are true (know it so surely that we act and live it every day and do not even need to think about it or question it), our battle will largely be won.

Dr. Walter Stromer is a blind professor. He lives in a small town in Iowa and teaches at the local college. He is thought of by his colleagues and students as successful, quite successful—and he doubtless shares that opinion. But do his associates think of him as successful measured by others on the campus, or only by the standard of what they think a blind person can do and can be expected to do? Which standard does Dr. Stromer use? For that matter, does he even know that there are different standards? Does he perhaps enjoy being thought of as remarkable, unusual, inspiring, and brave—failing to realize that he has made a bad bargain and that the eye is not freedom's passport to the soul?

A number of years ago Dr. Stromer appeared on a panel to discuss the meaning of blindness, and as a result he published a paper entitled "One Day In The Life of Me." Speaking of his early morning radio listening, he says: "Fortunately the station I listen to most is

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near the end of the dial. Finding stations in the middle of the dial can be a problem unless you know exactly what program to listen for."

Progressing to the time of departure for work, he says: "Just before I leave for class I remember I forgot to have my wife record the grades for the speeches made yesterday. I could do it in Braille, but it would be most tedious and time-consuming."

In further reference to Braille he says: "Looking for one sheet of paper in a stack is not bad when you can see; it's maddeningly slow when you have to run your fingers over the first dots of every sheet to figure out what it is."

As he leaves the house, he says: "But finally I'm off to school, after pausing in the door for a minute to try to remember if I've got everything. Others do that, too, but they can see things lying on the chair or table, to remind them to take along; with me it has to be a more conscious mental effort. Which explains of course why I'm so alert, because I have to use my brain more, which is what keeps it sharp, or wears it to a frazzle."

His thoughts as he goes from home to campus are in the same vein: "Walking to school is fairly relaxing," he says. "At least once a week I try to remember to be grateful for not having to fight the noise and congestion of the city." What a melodramatic piece of self-pity! Many people prefer small towns to cities, but I wonder how many of them are able to work blindness and pathos into it. After all, the city has advantages, too—and you could probably get blindness into that as well if you put your mind to it.

And how does Dr. Stromer feel about

his teaching? He says: "In a few minutes I'm in class. After twenty-two years I'm fairly comfortable."

After all of this tension and heavy introspection, it is only natural that Dr. Stromer feels tense and a little weary. A counteractant might be in order. "Home to lunch now," he says. "Just a good eight-minute walk, downhill all the way. A small glass of wine, a short nap, maybe only five minutes, and then lunch and I'm ready for the afternoon.... I stretch out for a nap before supper. I wonder if all blind people need those naps as much as I do. I think I'm fairly relaxed, but I'm sure an average day takes more nervous energy out of me than it does out of somebody with good vision, because so many things that sighted people can do without thinking, I have to do with a good bit of conscious effort."

Stromer is not a phony. He believes it—and his associates believe it. But it is false to the core. It is what I call "The Stromer Syndrome." His neighbors think (within the limits, of course, of common sense and what they believe a blind person can do) that he is wonderful. They make of him a conversation piece. They tell him, each other, and anybody else who will listen that he is witty, accomplished, and inspiring. He uses the same words we use—independence, understanding, realistic approach to blindness, full participation in society, and all of the rest—but he does not mean what we mean. In his daily life and thinking he exemplifies almost every misconception about the inferiority and helplessness of the blind that I have ever heard: Blind people have difficulty tuning in radio stations. Braille is tedious and

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ineffective. It cannot be scanned. Blind people have more trouble than others remembering what to take to work. This makes their minds alert. They meet their problems with humor. They are grateful to live in a small town to avoid the congestion of cities. After twenty-two years they are fairly comfortable teaching. They have more tensions than others and, therefore, require more naps, and a little wine.

Dr. Stromer undoubtedly feels that his attitudes and behavior are a plus in the struggle of the blind for advancement, but every day his influence is negative. Society (knowing nothing about blindness) has made him what he is and taught him its values. Now, he returns the compliment. He reinforces the misconceptions and teaches society. If his situation was unique (if the "Stromer Syndrome" was personal to the man), it would hardly be worth our attention. We would simply turn our heads in pity and embarrassment and let it go at that. But it is not personal. It is endemic and generic. It has dogged the heels of every minority that has ever walked the road to freedom.

How many blacks in the early part of this century tried to straighten their hair and look white? How many laughed, shuffled their feet, and played Amos and Andy to fit the mold of the times? Even more to the point, how many secretly thought the role they were given was just and proper? All of them some of the time, and some of them all of the time. The incentive to believe was overwhelming. Every day they were rewarded for conforming and punished for objecting. Believing, they lived the myth and helped it come true—and both they and society were diminished accord-

ingly. As Herbert Spencer said: "No one can be perfectly free until all are free. No one can be perfectly moral until all are moral." Only when a majority of the blacks came to realize that no imagined advantage, no immediate gain, and no avoidance of punishment could take the place of the privileges and, for that matter, the pains and responsibilities of first-class status did they begin to experience fulfillment—and, then, the world changed.

As it was with the blacks, so it is with the blind. We are part of the general culture, and the pressure to believe and conform is constantly with us. It all comes together in a single sentence in a letter I recently received from a man in Ohio. After telling me that he was losing his sight, he said: "I believe I would rather be dead than blind." Consider the capacity for enjoyment and productive work and the level of daily activity of the average member of the National Federation of the Blind, and ask yourself whether you believe this man's opinion results from dire predicament or cultural conditioning.

Sometimes, of course, the blind person's acceptance of the stereotype is not just conditioning but an attempt (whether conscious or otherwise) to use it for advantage. Phillip Mangold is a blind man who lives in California. In 1980 he wrote a booklet called: The Pleasure of Eating for Those Who Are Visually Impaired. We do not have to go beyond the title to find the problem. There is pleasure in eating, and those who are blind eat; but to imply that there is a connection is a distortion and a disservice. It plays upon the notion that the blind are mysteriously

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different from the sighted and that we require expert help (presumably from Mr. Mangold) to do the simplest task. His appeal to the public's fears and misconceptions may sell his booklet and promote his employment, but (whether he knows it or not) the price is too high and the bargain bad.

When we consider public education (the second of the four essential components in our pattern of freedom), we are reminded again that none of the four stands alone. They overlap and interweave to form a composite. What the blind believe about themselves, they teach to the public; and what the public believes conditions the blind. Not only individuals but also organizations may have negative impact and mistaken attitudes. The American Council of the Blind is a prime example.

Its state affiliate, the Missouri Council of the Blind, plans to hold its 1985 convention in St. Joseph. Carolyn Anderson, Secretary-Treasurer of the local chapter of the Missouri Council of the Blind, talked to the St. Joseph News-Press about the matter last fall. In an article appearing October 28, 1984, she says: "We have a commitment from Boy Scouts who are working on merit badges to serve as volunteer guides when needed by a delegate. Free transportation from both bus stations to the hotel has been arranged. And, since there is no day or night for the blind, the hotel is even providing for food service in case someone decides it's breakfast time at 2 in the morning."

If we did not know the philosophy of the American Council of the Blind, we might be astonished. As it is, we accept this statement as standard procedure—simply another obstacle to over-

come on our road to freedom. In an article captioned "Blind But Not Dumb" which appeared in the St. Joseph News-Press of November 20, 1984, Beryl Gordon (our local NFB president) tried to mitigate the damage. He said:

"Often I am asked, 'Why can't organizations of and for the blind get together? They are all working toward the same thing, aren't they?'"

"This is a very hard question to answer in one short sentence, and until you see something in the newspaper such as I have recently read you don't even try.

"A member of the Missouri Council of the Blind was quoted as saying that since there is no day or night for the blind, the hotel where they will be holding their 1985 convention will be providing food service in case one of them would decide it was breakfast time at 2:00 a.m.

"Can you just imagine what life would be like for the blind if all of us believed something this ignorant? Can you imagine what potential employers might think when reading something this degrading about blind persons' intelligence?"

"It's no wonder we can't find jobs. It is no wonder public facilities do not want us to come in. It is no wonder others have the attitude that we need to be taken care of."

In case you think Ms. Anderson was misquoted by the reporter, listen to her answer in the News-Press of November 29, 1984. She says: "As usual, the National Federation of the Blind misinterprets and twists things for their own purposes. We believe the NFB confronts everything with rudeness, abruptness and single-mindedness. Such negative re-

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actions make it more difficult for those of us trying to work in a positive way. We try to deal with local businesses, officials and the public without considering them to be our enemies. Focusing our efforts on the good and the positive and remembering with gratitude the help we get from the sighted in our community, we have improved our outlook. We try to keep a sense of humor and look at life's inconveniences with some amount of laughter. Perhaps the NFB should try this and not be critical of other people and their efforts."

Whatever else may be said, Carolyn Anderson and Beryl Gordon are not working for the same thing. In one sense, of course, she is right: We could laugh at ourselves, be grateful for whatever we get, and accept the stereotype—but the price is too high. Such conduct translates into exclusion from employment, custodial treatment, and second-class status; and it also blights the spirit and shrivels the soul—for whatever we live and believe, that we surely become.

And we are not just dealing with generalities. It is not simply a matter of being nice or saving feelings. To the extent that we fail to find a way to educate the public, lack the courage to provide that education even in the face of hostility, or are unable to understand our true potential, we and all other blind people suffer. I recently received a letter from the sighted mother of an adopted blind child expressing appreciation for our literature and encouragement: "My daughter Shelly," she said, "is now eleven years old. She is fully integrated in a local school and has learned to read and write Braille.

"Six years ago, when we adopted her, she was a 'potential unknown,' high-risk adoption case. We took her out of a small institution, where she had lived all of her life. She had spent most of her time confined to a large hospital-sized crib, with no stimulation and little human contact. She was in diapers and ate only pureed baby food, which had to be fed to her. In the past six years this same child has become bilingual, is in her third year of piano lessons, skates, swims, rides a double bike, reads and writes, and is no longer a 'potential unknown' but rather a child of great potential."

So writes this sighted mother, and her words give us perspective. It is not pleasant to disagree with others and take public stands, but sometimes the alternative is worse. We do not regard our neighbors as enemies, but this does not mean that we are willing to submit to diapers and pureed baby food. It does not mean that we are willing to accept slavery—even if the slavery is gently offered, kindly meant, and well-intentioned. As John Dewey said: "Liberty is not just an idea, an abstract principle. It is power, effective power to do specific things." And as Benjamin Franklin said: "They that give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." We want no strife or confrontation, but we are not willing to give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety. We have learned the power of collective action, and we will do what we have to do. We are simply no longer willing to be second-class citizens.

The need for public education is everywhere apparent. The fact is typi-

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fied by an article appearing in the Omaha World-Herald of December 5, 1984. Headlined "Donations Pay for Glasses for Needy During the Year," the article says: "Detecting and solving vision problems are important in the proper development of children, said Dr. Matilda McIntire, director of community pediatrics at Creighton University. That is why the cooperative effort of The World-Herald Good Fellows and Creighton is valuable to the community, she said. 'We feel very strongly that a child cannot learn if he cannot see.'"

To which we reply, thousands of us grew up as blind children and have achieved a moderate degree of literacy and success. If Dr. McIntire is right, I wonder how we did it.

Early this year I received a letter from one P. F. Membrey, who described himself as the director of CAPEX, a product consulting and export firm from London, England. He said, concerning a new Braille-Writer which he wished to sell: "Following its recent introduction to the United Kingdom market, CAPEX have been appointed sole distribution agents for this unique product. Accordingly, we are now able to supply the BRAILLEWRITER to those institutions or individuals who work with or have care of blind or partially sighted people."

Mr. Membrey, Carolyn Anderson, and Dr. Stromer would probably say we are nit-picking, but people usually say what they mean even if they do not mean to say what they say. The orientation which (whether inadvertently or not) leads to talk of selling a product to "institutions or individuals who have care of blind or partially sighted people" is destructive and damaging. We

must observe it, reject it, and attack it—not only for public enlightenment but for our own self-respect. As Harold Laski said: "We acquiesce in the loss of freedom every time we are silent in the face of injustice." We want no strife or confrontation, but we are simply no longer willing to be second-class citizens.

The need for public education about blindness is repeatedly demonstrated. Emotional newspaper articles appear telling about sighted people who blind-fold themselves to know what it is like to be blind; the National Geographic talks about an inchworm "groping along slowly, reminiscent of a blind man with a cane," [2.] and in a descriptive brochure Ewing Mays (the founder of Mays Mission for the Handicapped) says: "Every day there are handicapped people here training handicapped people ... one amputee working with another amputee, one deaf person training another deaf person, and even a blind person guiding another blind person." The operative word, of course, is "even." Why "even?" In that one word is summed up the prejudice of centuries—a way of life and a system we are determined to change.

And we are changing the system. We are heightening our own self-awareness and conducting extensive campaigns of public education—but this is not enough. We must deal with the legal system and the law. Again, let us consider the blacks. Before they could begin to achieve equality, they had to build an image within themselves. That was the first and most important thing. Then, they had to educate the public, for they could not exist in a vacuum or live what the culture would not accept. But they also had to do something else.

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As long as the law made it impossible for them to buy or rent certain property, required them to attend segregated schools, made them ride in the back of the bus, and even said they must use separate water fountains and bathrooms, all of the self-belief and public education in the world would not be sufficient. They had to change the laws and the interpretation of the laws, and they did change them.

Our situation is parallel. We must fight in the courts and the Congress. Judges order children to be taken from blind parents on the ground that the blind cannot raise them; airline officials tell us we cannot occupy exit row seating and that we must sit on blankets for fear we cannot control our bladders; insurance companies deny us coverage; amusement parks refuse to let us ride; health clubs decline to let us in; and employers routinely discriminate. Unless we can move toward equal treatment under the law, self-belief and public education will not be sufficient and cannot be sustained. And, of course, we are making headway. Through court action we have repeatedly restored blind children to their parents. We have persuaded Congress and the state legislatures to expand opportunities and remove discrimination—and we currently have at least a dozen lawsuits under way.

Let anyone who believes we can live with the law as it is presently written consider the following section of the Tennessee Code: "Section 22-1-102. Incompetent persons.—Persons convicted of certain infamous offenses specially designated in this code, persons of unsound mind, persons not in the full possession of their senses of hearing

and seeing, and habitual drunkards are incompetent to act as jurors."

That section of the Code is the law in Tennessee at this very moment. John Robb, a blind Tennessean, served on a jury in Nashville last year, but he did it on sufferance and at the whim of the judge. The Tennessee jury law is not only degrading—it is false in its premises. Today we are striking down such laws in state after state, and an increasing number of us are proving their absurdity by serving on juries. I did it myself last year.

As we make progress in reforming the law and getting new interpretations by the courts, we strengthen our self-belief and educate the public. Self-belief, public education, and the law—these three elements intertwine and overlap. But something else is required—the fourth element, confrontation. What minority has ever gone from second-class status to first-class citizenship without it? What minority could? As we come to feel that we deserve equality, we increasingly resist coercion. But it goes beyond that. Unless we are willing to be absolutely docile and totally self-effacing, confrontation is inevitable.

In this connection our experience with the airlines is instructive. They deal with us in an arbitrary, capricious, and custodial manner. If we are willing to be humiliated publicly and handled like children, airline personnel will generally treat us fairly well. Otherwise, we are likely to be subjected to anything from a tongue lashing to a trip off the plane with the police.

A few months ago a blind woman in the state of Washington was plopped down on a blanket in an airplane seat, told by

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airline personnel that she must sit there, and loudly and publicly informed by the flight attendant that, as the attendant put it, it was not because she might "wet" her "pants" but so that in case of emergency she could be quickly lifted onto the evacuation slide. Explaining that she was quite mobile and unwilling to endure such treatment, the blind woman vocally refused to sit on the blanket and pushed it onto the floor. Later she brought a legal action against the airline and was given monetary damages and an apology. But if she had meekly followed orders, the lawsuit would never have been filed. She would have been humiliated and "put down," and her self-esteem and the public image would have suffered accordingly. But in objecting she created hostility and might have been arrested. If we intend to stand up for our rights at all, we can simply not avoid a certain amount of confrontation.

Mike Uribes is one of our members in Fresno, California. Not long ago his chapter president had occasion to write the following letter to a Fresno business establishment:

"On December 19, Mr. Michael Uribes, a blind Fresno resident, while shopping in your mall, was approached by one of your security employees, Mr. Tim Levinson.

"Mr. Levinson asked Mr. Uribes if he needed any assistance. Mr. Uribes responded that he did not. However, Mr. Levinson proceeded to follow Mr. Uribes through the mall and a couple of times even put his hand on Mr. Uribes' arm. Again, Mr. Uribes stated that he really did not need any assistance and thanked Mr. Levinson for his offer. Mr. Levinson walked away indignantly saying, 'Those damned blind people! They sure

are arrogant.'

"If Mr. Uribes had been a sighted person, this incident would not have happened.

"Mr. Uribes has lived in Fresno all of his life and has been shopping without aid in your mall for at least twelve years. He travels independently.

"Mr. Uribes is a member of the National Federation of the Blind of Fresno, which is affiliated with a state and national organization of the same name. Blind persons have the same rights and responsibilities as the sighted and wish to be treated as first-class citizens."

In writing that letter our Fresno president undoubtedly created hostility, but what was she to do? For that matter, what was Mike Uribes to do? He could have avoided confrontation by meekly doing as he was told and allowing himself to be led around the store at Mr. Levinson's whim. By taking Mr. Uribes' arm when he was asked not to do so, Mr. Levinson committed a battery and violated the law; but public sentiment being what it is, he was probably never in danger of being prosecuted. However, what if Mr. Uribes had responded in kind? What if he had showed as much bad temper as Mr. Levinson did? Can we always be sure that the blind person will be cool, polite, level-headed, long-suffering, and patient—even if the sighted person is not? In fact, is that what we want?

As Walter Lippman said: "Men cannot be made free by laws unless they are in fact free because no man can buy and no man can coerce them. That is why the Englishman's belief that his home is his castle and that the king cannot enter it, like the American's conviction that

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he must be able to look any man in the eye and tell him to go to hell, are the very essence of the free man's way of life."

Is that sort of thing all right (in fact, praiseworthy) for the sighted but not all right for the blind? And what does Lippman mean when he says that no man can coerce you if you are truly free? Does he mean that it is all right for the sighted to resist coercion—even if it means looking somebody in the eye and telling him to go to hell—even if it means using necessary force—but that it is not all right for the blind? Is Lippman's pronouncement meant only for everybody else—or does it include us, too? Can blind people hope to be free Americans? We gave our answer to that question almost fifty years ago. We formed the National Federation of the Blind—and it is still here, stronger and more active today than every before in its history.

It is not only the "Stromer Syndrome" which is arrayed against us. It is also the "be grateful and do as I tell you, or I'll call you militant" syndrome. Let those who oppose our march to freedom call us what they please and say what they like. We will not grovel; we will not pretend that right is wrong; and we will not turn back from the course we have set. No, we do not want strife and confrontation—and yes, we prefer peace and reason. But we know the power of collective action, and we will do what we have to do. We are simply no longer willing to be second-class citizens.

Self-belief, public education, the law, and confrontation—these are the elements in the pattern of our freedom, and each is necessary. They overlap and

interweave, and if anyone of them is omitted, all of the rest become meaningless and impossible. Because of the work of the National Federation of the Blind, we who are blind have it better today than ever before in our history, and the hostility we face is not a cause for dejection but an omen of victory; for until a minority is close to its goal, confrontation is neither achievable nor useful. Earlier it is impossible, and later it is unnecessary.

The beginning strands of the pattern of freedom are always woven by slaves, and we have known slavery. Some of us still endure it, and none of us has totally escaped it. A few of us are so immersed in it that we even say we like it and do not know another way exists. But the National Federation of the Blind is abroad in the land, and the blind are learning new ways. We hear the statements of freedom, and they call to our souls and quicken our dreams:

"If," said Samuel Adams, "you love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude better than the animating contest of freedom, go home from us in peace."

"They that give up essential liberty," said Benjamin Franklin, "to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

"Freedom," said Max Stirner, "cannot be granted. It must be taken."

We hear, and we understand. We know what we must do, and we have counted the cost. We fight not only for ourselves but also for those who went before us, for Dr. tenBroek and the other founders of our movement—and for those who come after, the blind of the next generation, the children and the children to be. And we will not fail. The stakes are

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too high and the alternative too terrible. Tomorrow is bright with promise. We go to meet it with gladness: And we take with us all that we have—our hopes and our dreams, our will to work and our knowledge of deprivation, our faith and our purpose, and our heritage of slavery. And this also we take—our trust in ourselves, our love for each other, and our belief in the ultimate goodness of people. My brothers and my

sisters, the future is ours! Come, join me!—and we will march together to freedom!

#### NOTES

[1.] This poem was copied from a wall in New York City in 1985.

[2.] National Geographic, August, 1983, page 222.

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